

Golden Eagle

Description:

Sometimes called the "King of Birds", the golden eagle is Idaho's largest eagle. Impressive in its size, it is often seen soaring over the mountains and canyons of western North America.

It's Golden?

At first glance it is hard to see where the name "golden" eagle originates. Adult golden eagles are uniformly dark brown, not gold, when viewed at a distance. It is only with a closer look that the namesake golden-brown feathers on the back of its head and nape of the neck can be seen. Young golden eagles sport the brown plumage of their parents but also have a band of white on the tail as well as a white patch on the wrists. Golden eagles have feathers all the way down the legs to the feet. The golden eagle is very large; its wingspan may be up to 7.5 feet which is taller than most people. As with most raptors, the female is considerably larger than the male.

What Else Could it Be?

The large size and uniformly dark plumage of an adult golden eagle is unmistakable. Juvenile golden eagles can be mistaken for juvenile bald eagles so careful observation is necessary to distinguish between the two species. Juvenile bald eagles are slightly smaller and tend to have a lot of white splotches on the stomach and wings. What else could look like it in the air? The turkey vulture has wings held in a deep "V" and tends to tip and sway when soaring, unlike the steady soaring of an eagle.

Stay Out of My Territory!

Golden eagles live in mountainous areas, prairies, deserts, and other places where rugged terrain creates abundant winds and thermals. But stay out of their way! Golden eagles are quite territorial and will always defend the area around their nest site. Their home-range size varies depending on habitat anywhere from 35 sq. miles up to 200 sq. miles. They reside year round throughout Canada, the western U.S. and south into Mexico. Their summer breeding range includes Canada and north to the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. Some golden eagles live in their nesting territory all year. However, some eagles with northern breeding grounds migrate south from September to October and return north from March to April.

Scavenging Predators

Golden eagles eat a wide variety of prey, but their usual diet consists of jackrabbits, marmots and ground squirrels. They will readily take advantage of carrion (dead animals) and can be seen scavenging a carcass along with bald eagles, ravens, magpies, coyotes and other scavengers. Talons are important tools for hunting and defense. Eagles kill their prey by penetrating its flesh with their talons. Because the eagle's beak and talons are made of keratin, the same substance as human hair and fingernails, they grow continuously and are able to withstand extremely cold temperatures. A golden eagle's beak is a strong weapon but is also delicate enough to groom a mate's feathers or feed a small portion of food to a newly hatched chick. The razor-sharp hook at the tip of the eagles' beak is used for tearing which is important for an animal that eats meat.

Protected

For many years, golden eagles were persecuted by humans who mistakenly thought that the birds were a threat to livestock. Thousands of golden eagles were shot, poisoned or trapped in efforts to protect livestock across the American West. In 1962, golden eagles were given legal protection under the Bald Eagle Protection Act and numbers have stabilized in most parts of the country. Golden eagles have also suffered from collisions with power lines or been electrocuted when landing on power poles. Many western power companies have worked with wildlife agencies to address these problems.

Soaring High Above!

Thousands of feathers, which are lightweight yet extremely strong, and hollow yet highly flexible, protect a golden eagle from heat and cold by trapping layers of air. Feathers also provide waterproofing and are crucial for flight. The tips of the feathers are tapered so that when the eagle fully extends its wings, the feathers are widely separated for maximum surface area when soaring. Soaring allows eagles to conserve energy by using currents of rising warm air called thermals. They can just sit back, relax, and travel hundreds of miles. Using less energy is important when eagles need to travel long distances to make their way to warmer climates. Large groups of migrating raptors may use the same thermal and can be seen soaring as a group called a "kettle."

Empty Nesters

Golden eagles usually choose cliff sites to build their nest. A pair of golden eagles may have as many as ten different nests within their territory and use them on a rotating basis. (pic of nest here) Some nests can be quite large, eight to 10 feet across and three to four feet deep, and are made of sticks, brush, roots and twigs with a nest cup lined with mosses, lichens, down and fur.

Breeding season for golden eagles is February to June. They mate at about four years of age and often stay paired with the same mate for life. The female lays one to four eggs with two being the most common amount. Both parents share incubation duty and the responsibilities of raising the young. Young golden eagles don't leave the nest right away either. The young hang around the nest 65 to 70 days after hatching and will remain dependent upon their parents for another month or two.

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Golden Eagle
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Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Golden Eagle
2. **Scientific Name:** *Aquila chrysaetos*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight (male): 8 lbs.
Weight (female): 12 lbs.
Length: 30- 40 inches.
Wingspan: 80-88 inches.
5. **Diet:** Small to large mammals and medium and large birds.
6. **Young:** Usually 2 per year; called eaglets.
7. **Lifespan:** 15-20 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Ciconiiformes
Family: ?Accipitridae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**